

## Bowlby's Attachment

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### Author Note

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### Abstract

John Bowlby (1907-1990) is credited with founding what has become known as Attachment Theory. This paper defines attachment as articulated by Bowlby. Mary Ainsworth's (1913-1999) Strange Situation Procedure is described along with the four styles of attachment identified through use of the procedure. Distinctions between secure, insecure, organized and disorganized attachment styles along with the impact one's style of attachment has upon human development.

### **Introduction**

In 1958 John Bowlby published *The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother* where he advocated the study of infants with their mothers using methods akin to those used by field researchers in ethology studying other species in their natural habitats. This research oriented approach to human development is foundational to attachment theory.

### **Attachment Defined**

Bowlby (1969, 1980) developed the idea that human beings have behavioral attachment systems which are activated and deactivated by environmental cues. When a person's attachment system is activated by "anything alarming" (Ibid, p. 216) he or she seeks to gain and maintain proximity to a loved one or primary caregiver. Attachment is therefore "defined as seeking and maintaining proximity to another individual." (Ibid, p. 194)

Bowlby conceptualized attachment as a biologically based evolutionary adaptation necessitated by the relative vulnerability of the human infant situated in its environment of evolutionary adaptedness. (Ibid. p. 36) The "function of attachment behavior is protection from predators" (Ibid, p. 224) which eventually leads to "breeding success" (Ibid, p. 225) — "a line of reasoning that, familiar to all field naturalists, remains almost unknown to psychologists and psychoanalysts." (Ibid., p. 226). Secure attachment provides the child and later the adult with a safe haven of comfort and a secure base of courage to explore.

### **Ainsworth's Strange Situation**

Ainsworth first met Bowlby in 1950 by answering a newspaper ad in "the *London Times*" to become one of his research assistants. Later she became his equal in developing an empirically based theory of attachment. (Bretherton, 1992, p. 761) In 1963, Ainsworth began using what became known as the Strange Situation. (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) Bretherton

(1992) describes the procedure as “a 20-minute miniature drama with eight episodes. Mother and infant are introduced to a laboratory play room where they are later joined by an unfamiliar woman. While the stranger plays with the baby, the mother leaves briefly and then returns. A second separation ensues during which the baby is completely alone. Finally, the stranger and then the mother return.” (p. 765) The test gradually increases stress for the infant eliciting the baby's attachment under that stress.

Building upon Bowlby's definition of attachment as proximity seeking and maintaining behavior, Ainsworth's Strange Situation enabled her to identify observable patterns of attachment for specific mother-infant dyads. These patterns were then compared with qualitative interactional data regarding the same mother-infant dyads collected by Ainsworth and her team in their carefully documented in-home observations. The resulting categories of attachment corresponded to their caretaker's attachment categories. That is, secure mothers had secure children and insecure mothers had insecure children. These correlations are stable over time and universal (Hesse, 2008).

### **Categories of Attachment**

Behind a child's attachment classification in the Strange Situation is “a history of bids and responses within the [mother-child] dyad, and these patterns of interaction, rather than individual behaviors, reveal the underlying character of the relationship.” (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson, 2008, p. 78) That is, given the child's built in biological need to find in his or her caregiver “a ‘haven of safety’ and as a ‘secure base’ while exploring the environment (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth et al, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982)” the child adopts an organized strategy to meet this need in direct *response* to his or her caregiver's *bids*. (Ibid)

“The terms ‘secure’ and ‘insecure’ do not describe simply the manifest behaviors of the infant within the attachment relationship. Rather, the terms describe an infant’s apparent perception of the availability of the caregiver if a need for comfort or protection should arise, and the organization of the infant’s responses to the caregiver in light of those perceptions of availability.” (Ibid, p. 79)

Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland and Carlson (2008) describe attachment behaviors in Strange Situation as follows:

### **Secure children.**

Infants classified as secure with their caregivers in the Strange Situation are able to use the caregivers as a secure base for exploration in the novel room. An infant may check back with a caregiver, but usually engages in exploring the toys. Upon separation the infant may be overtly distressed, and play may become impoverished. A secure infant may be friendly with the stranger, and may even be somewhat comforted by the stranger during separation, but there is a clear preference for comfort by the caregiver. Upon reunion with the caregiver, a distressed secure infant will seek proximity or contact with the caregiver, will be readily comforted by the proximity or contact, and will maintain contact as long as it is needed. Eventually, most secure infants will return to play. Even when not distressed, a secure infant is responsive to the caregiver’s return, greeting with a smile or vocalization and initiating interaction. (p. 81)

### **Insecure children.**

#### ***Avoidant.***

Infants classified as avoidant with their caregivers will usually engage with the toys in the presence of their caregivers. These infants are unlikely to show affective sharing (e.g., smiling or showing toys to the caregiver) before the first separation, although they may engage the caregiver for instrumental assistance (Waters, Wippman, & Sroufe, 1979). Upon separation the infant is unlikely to be distressed, although some distress when left alone is possible. Avoidant infants tend to treat the stranger similarly to the caregiver, and in some cases the infants are actually more responsive with the stranger. Upon reunion with the caregiver, avoidant infants show signs of ignoring, looking or turning away from, or moving past the caregiver rather than approaching. If picked up, avoidant infants will make no effort to maintain the contact. (p. 81)

***Resistant.***

Infants classified as resistant with their caregivers are conspicuously unable to use their caregivers as a secure base for exploration of the novel setting. These infants may seek proximity and contact with the caregivers even before separation occurs, and may be quite wary of the situation and of the stranger. Upon separation resistant infants are likely to be quite distressed, and are not easily calmed by the stranger. Upon reunion they are likely to want proximity or contact with their caregivers, but not to be calmed by the contact. Some resistant infants display unusual passivity, continuing to cry but failing to seek contact actively. In most cases, however, the hallmark of this classification is seeking contact and then resisting contact angrily once it is achieved. There is a palpable ambivalence in many of these relationships. (p. 81)

***Disorganized.***

An infant who is classified as disorganized in the Strange Situation (in addition to an alternate, best-fitting classification of secure, avoidant, or resistant) exhibits conflicted, contradictory, or disoriented behaviors that indicate an inability to maintain one coherent attachment strategy in the face of distress (Main & Solomon, 1990). Disorganization can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, behaviors such as behavioral stilling, stereotypies, or direct fear of the parent. (p. 81)

**Implications of Attachment**

Longitudinal studies tracking children from birth to adulthood demonstrate attachment styles have enormous impact upon human development. Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson's (2008) outline some explanations for this impact. One explanation relates to a growing but still quite inconclusive body of research on the effect of attachment upon brain structure and function.

Another explanation involves emotional-self regulation, i.e. "the ability to control and modulate emotional responses, coping with arousal in order to maintain a motivating, but not debilitating, level of emotion (Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004)." (Ibid., p. 84)

A third explanation relates to the child's ability to behave with others in an attuned, appropriate manner. Obviously, this results in more pleasing mutually satisfying and successful relationships across the board of human experience—business, family, relationships:

Through observing and interacting with an attachment figure, an infant learns what it is like to behave in a relationship (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992; Gianino & Tronick, 1988; Pastor, 1981). The sensitive, responsive behavior of the caregiver in a secure dyad teaches the secure infant that communication is contingent upon each partner's cues and responses. The insensitive, uncoordinated interactions of an insecure dyad teach the insecure infant that communication is not a responsive interaction, but a series of poorly coordinated bids and responses. All infants carry forward not only the expectations of how interactions with social partners are coordinated, but also their experiences with caregivers in succeeding or failing to construct synchronous, reciprocal social and emotional exchanges. Secure children develop such abilities as self-control and behavioral reciprocity, which result in more skilled interactions than those of insecure children. These interactional skills can then be applied to new settings and new relationships, resulting in continued differences that are reinforced and strengthened across development. (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson, 2008, p. 85)

A fourth explanation involves internal representations. Secure children “grow to see the world as good and responsive, and the self as deserving such consideration. Infants who have insecure relationships are responded to [by their primary caretaker in infancy and childhood] harshly, erratically, or not at all. They grow to see the world as unpredictable and insensitive, and the self as not deserving better treatment. These internal working models are then carried forward to new relationships and new experiences, guiding children's expectations and behavior.” (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland & Carlson's, 2008, p. 85)

True to Bowlby's insistence upon empirical research informing and confirming theory, longitudinal studies indicate secure attachment predicts healthy dependence, “confidence that one can succeed, and tolerance of frustration in goal seeking”, greater “ego resilience”, empathy, and social competence. It should be noted, however, that “secure attachment is not a guarantee of mental health, but rather is viewed as a protective factor or buffer.” (Ibid, pp. 85-90)

Conversely, insecure attachment has been identified as a significant risk factor in the development of clinical levels of psychopathology and disorganized attachment significantly predicts dissociative disorders. (Ibid, pp. 90-91)

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